CYPHER HUMAN RIGHTS COMICS WITH ADAM SHAPIRO



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On this episode, Ian spoke with Adam Shapiro, Co-editor of *We Are Many*, a comics anthology released as part of the Cypher Zine project (@cypher_comics on Instagram) and published by Radix Media. The book pairs artists and activists to create narratives around the defense of women and sex workers around the globe.

Among other topics, the conversation touches on the process of matching local artists with the activists on the ground, notions of human rights defense (as defined by UN guidelines) as it relates to autonomous, self-directed struggle. They also speak about the strengths and limitations of NGO-led initiatives, and the effects of emergent disasters on long-term organizing initiatives.

Cypher Zine website: https://www.cypherzine.org/

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TFSR: Thank you for taking the time to talk to me. If you could please just give me your name, any relevant group affiliations to this conversation, and maybe give me your pronouns?

Adam Shapiro: Sure. My name is Adam Shapiro, he/him, and let's see... I'm the co-founder and co-publisher of Cypher Comics, which is the entity that produced the book, *We Are Many: Defending Women and Sex Worker Human Rights*.

TFSR: Can you talk a little bit about the origins and the goals of Cypher Comics and how it relates to the wider picture of Front Line Defenders?

AS: Sure, so we started Cypher Comics a few months after the pandemic began in 2020. In my role, at the time, as the head of visibility and communications for Front Line Defenders to the Irish Human Rights Organization, we were working to defend human rights defenders around the world. We were looking for ways to keep up the visibility work, giving a platform for human rights defenders and their stories when the world was sort of shutting down and when it wasn't really possible to travel.

I used to travel and do video documentation and other types of narrative storytelling. I wanted to come up with a way to continue to be able to bring forward stories and get them out there and disseminate them with those challenges in place. I had previously done a book called La Lucha back in 2015, about women human rights defenders in Mexico, it was a graphic novel book that told the stories of a number of woman human rights defenders. We were quite successful with it, both in the United States and in Mexico. So, I thought, let's try using comics again.

Working with different artists from around the world we created a zine, a digital zine that could be the platform for these stories. So, together with Beldan Sezen, who is an artist and collaborator I worked with before on other projects, we discussed the idea and brought it to fruition after just about six or eight weeks of discussion and then planned the first edition. I think it was in July 2020 that we brought the first Cypher zine to digital print. From there it became a monthly project, bringing forward anywhere between three and five stories a month.

During the pandemic period, it was a bit easier to do because my own work was severely restricted in terms of what I was able to do compared to normal time. So, I was able to dedicate a lot more time to Cypher. It's continued for almost two years before I finally stepped away from Front Line Defenders. But when I did, I was able to negotiate to be able to take the project with me—Cypher with me—out of the organization, and we're now an independent entity. We'll be restarting the zine in the winter of 2024.

TFSR: Can you draw some parallels or maybe compare and contrast your experience working with graphic storytelling as compared to documentary storytelling?

AS: Sure, I think there's a couple of things. So, for one, working with artists to depict another person's story, and in the way we worked was to pair an artist with a human rights activist, or a community of activists, and had the artist's work with those protagonists to develop the story, to develop the script, to develop the look in the feel of the artwork itself, and then to bring that to us. We give the artists huge amounts of creative license to work with the defenders to bring those stories forward. Oftentimes, our role between Beldan and myself, was just simply to offer editing suggestions when it came to language more than anything else, especially because in a lot of places the folks we worked with were not native English speakers. So, we were working in translations a lot of times.

So that kind of process where you're bringing together somebody who's coming at it from a visual storytelling perspective and someone who is the subject of the documentation itself, bringing them together to collaborate, I think creates a different dynamic and a different kind of control over the story. I, as a documentary filmmaker, my perspective is that I'm asking questions of the subject, the person that I'm interviewing, and obviously I'm coming at it with a perspective with those questions that I'm asking. When we get to the editing stage of video, I'm making decisions to a large extent on my own as the editor and director of these projects. I'm sharing them in a collaborative way with people I've interviewed, but largely, a lot of the editorial decisions are made by myself and then brought forward to for review.

Whereas in the comics, the style that we work with is to allow that collaboration throughout the entire process between the artist, the creator of the visual storytelling, and the subject of the storytelling. I think there's a different kind of engagement there, a different kind of control that the activist has over how their story is depicted. We've had phenomenal engagements between the activists and the artists on all the comics that we've done.

Finally, I would say the difference also is with the audience. For a long time, documentary films have been seen in the human rights community as a way to sort of get the word out there, to get messaging out there, to get lessons or important points from the Human Rights space told to a wider audience. But I think the reality is that, for the most part, human rights documentaries tend to be seen mainly by the human race community with some exceptions that tend to end up and getting more into the mainstream. But largely, it's audiences being found in communities that are already supportive, are already to some extent clued in. It's not really engaging new or different audiences.

What we found with comics and graphic storytelling is that there's an entire world of an audience out there that is interested in this format, that is interested in this way of storytelling, and are open to receiving this kind of communications, this kind of storytelling, about human subjects that have to do with human rights or other types of struggles, or liberation, or other kinds of storytelling that is just one among many types of stories that can be told through this medium. Because of that, I feel like we were able to reach, actually, a different and wider audience with this format than we would through video.

It's also more accessible in a lot of ways too because there is still a technology issue, but with the graphic storytelling, you don't need to be literate to receive it and to understand the messaging and to understand the stories. While you don't necessarily have to read in a documentary film, the accessibility of documentary films, I think is more limited than what we're able to do with the comics and the graphic storytelling. So, for me, even though I come from a documentary film background, and I have zero talent whatsoever when it comes to any kind of artistic production on paper, I find it can be a much more effective means of communicating.

TFSR: Thank you very much. Can you talk a little bit more in depth about the process of pairing the activist with the artists? I'm interested in knowing what kind of factors informed the pairings. I'm interested in knowing how close the results were with what you had envisioned.

AS: So, I think the approach that we've taken with us so far has largely been, once we know that we have an activist who's interested in using this format for storytelling purposes, Beldan and I will then do research. Our first step is to try to find an artist who's from the same country as the activist, both because of very technical issues like language, overcoming language barriers, understanding the cultural context, etc. time zones, but also because we feel that it's really important, if possible, for there to be face to face communication. Even though, again, we started this during the pandemic, so that even was a challenge. But where the artist can access, if not the individual, at least be able to understand and know the context in which these struggles are happening on that local level.

So that's kind of our first cut in the sense, to say, "Okay, if we have an activist from Sierra Leone, or from Egypt, or from Chile, or wherever... Let's try to find somebody from that country, if possible." If it wasn't possible to find somebody from their country, or if finding an artist in that country, if it happened to be a country where repression was rampant and freedom expression wasn't available at levels that we understood to be safe enough for an artist to produce, then we might try to find somebody from outside the country to work with, but still somebody from a similar cultural, linguistic, and who understood this political context in which that person was operating.

Then after that, it really depended. If we were working with somebody from an environmental background, we would try to research and find artists who had worked in that milieu before, people who were familiar with environmental concerns, or maybe had drawn or done some work in that sector before so that they were even more familiar with the context in which the human rights activist was operating, including and paying attention to identity issues, as well. So, if we were working within the indigenous activist community, we would try to find indigenous activists from that same country or general geographic region.

So those were some of the conditions that we had, and then after we would do the research and try to identify a few options, Beldan and I would share what we found with the activists, because oftentimes there would be different styles that

people worked in, and asked the activists what they preferred, where their preferences might be, what kind of things they were interested in visually from seeing the artist's work. Usually, we would be able to narrow it down to probably two options and then reach out to the artists.

We often tried to find artists who don't necessarily have a lot of exposure, in part because we like to see this as an opportunity to give up and coming artists an opportunity to have greater exposure with their work and promote it to an international audience. So that wasn't necessarily a criteria, but it was definitely something that we were intent on trying to use this platform to give greater opportunities.

TFSR: I'm used to talking with people who are organizing in an autonomist spaces towards autonomous ends. With that regard, my understanding is that your experience lies in the NGO space, is that correct?

AS: For this project, yeah, it came out of the NGO space. But myself personally, I've been a grassroots activist. I was one of the people who started the International Solidarity Movement in Palestine. I've been doing a lot of on the ground activism working with local communities in liberation struggles.

TFSR: In identifying these activists to participate, is this kind of coming from a confluence of both of those backgrounds? Is that right?

AS: Definitely. At least as far as Front Line Defenders go, who we consider to be human rights defenders, it didn't matter if they were part of an NGO or not, as long as they were undertaking some sort of activity, work, speaking out, writing whatever, standing on the front lines to defend the rights of their communities of other people, etc. It didn't matter what structure they belong to or whether they were independent, autonomous, part of a community, etc. So, we worked with folks from a variety of backgrounds.

TFSR: Thank you. In putting this together, did you approach the project with a specific audience in mind? In the introduction, you talk a little bit about the landmark comic philosophy book, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. McCloud said, "every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice, an equal partner in crime known as the reader." So, in assembling *We Are Many*, did you take any cues from previous works or approaches? What are you asking of the silent accomplice, the reader?

AS: With, not just the book, but the entire project of Cypher, we were very keen... Again, having come out of this idea that we have this privileged ability to access and engage with people who are at the forefront of struggles all over the world for basic rights, for various types of liberation, for protecting the environment, protecting their communities, and stories that are often not well known outside of

their immediate communities. The idea, or the premise of this was to try to create a bigger platform for those stories to be seen, heard, understood, and incorporated at various levels. So, whether it was using the comics as part of a larger advocacy plan, a route that the activists themselves were developing, or that as an international organization for Front Line Defenders' perspective, where we were supporting those advocacy efforts.

So using it that level, using a level of just trying to engage through dissemination of the comics, of the of the artwork through social media and other shared spaces within the activist's own community, like larger community, in their country or in their region, to give them a bigger platform, not only to talk about the work that they're doing, and the importance of the rights of their defending, but also in some ways, as an effort to sort of help develop security. The idea that the more an activist is known about, and their work is known, the harder it is for authorities to crack down on that person because then there would be a greater community outcry. So, there was kind of a protection element to this as well.

So, these are the kinds of things that we imagined and thought about when it came to the purposes for how these stories could be used, how they could be deployed, and what we were hoping for from the reader, from the different kinds of audiences that we were trying to engage. Some of it was about developing empathy, some of it was about developing greater awareness, some of it was about trying to compel action from those in the audience who are stakeholders who might be able to take action to support, whether it was for policy related things or potentially even funding purposes, exposing activists to a philanthropic community, for instance.

So, there was a variety of purposes, and depending on which audience we were thinking about, what we were hoping for and intending for there to be an impact from in terms of where they sit in the ecosystem of audience. For that, I would say one of the biggest things that sort of influence how we thought about the project was from the experience that we had had with Beldan. I worked with her before we started Cypher. We went off to, at the request of human rights activists in Manipur, India, which is an area of India, that is under military occupation, where access to the territory is quite restricted. We were able to get in and go and document. Beldan was the artist in this case because we weren't able to identify a local artist to work with who felt it was safe enough to draw and to do this and publish their work.

Beldan is an artist, she did her research, and of course we were there and meeting people and talking to people and going through the entire process with her there. Through that process of engagement, through that process of publishing—we published with a local Indian magazine, reaching a very wide audience throughout the entire country—we were able to sort of understand how the storytelling, this graphic storytelling, could be used for different spaces and different purposes and reaching different audiences with different expectations in mind.

One of the activists who we featured in that has since used the storytelling that we did to help elevate the profile of his organization, which worked for

LGBTQ+ rights in Manipur. It was an issue that didn't receive a lot of attention locally. It was sort of on the margins, but he was able to use the comic and the publication of it to help enhance his organization's standing in the community, and then also nationally and internationally, in order to be able to get greater attention and support from philanthropic organizations, etc.

Others used the comic, the story that we produced, to raise awareness about this territory and the fact that it was under a military occupation where people didn't have fundamental rights equal to other Indian citizens and use it on a national level to raise awareness. So those kinds of things, that experience very much influenced how we thought about Cypher and how we thought about the kind of impact it can have, including with the book, *We Are Many*.

TFSR: I noticed a prominent palette within the book, the pink and the purple figure prominently. I also noticed that the umbrellas figure prominently. Can you talk about what the umbrellas represent in the context of sex worker defense, the significance of the palette, and maybe the importance of tapping into existing symbolism in this kind of work, what the significance of that is and what the aims are?

AS: So, the red umbrella, as you point out, is very much a symbol/marker for sex workers. This has become sort of a globalized symbol. I don't know sufficiently enough about the history of that symbol, but I do know enough to know that this has become something that is ubiquitous within the sex worker rights movement in order to both mark to each other—the umbrella is meant to offer some form of protection, but also gathering in of the people in this movement. I think for the sex worker rights community that we've engaged both with other work that we've done, but also with the storytelling, having that symbol in there serves to both recognize and offer a sense of community, a sense that this is a safe space, that this is a story or depiction that resonates to the community because we understand, and the artists and the protagonists who insisted on the symbology being there, understand the significance of the symbol and the marking that it has and what it signifies to the community.

As editors, we didn't insist on it. We didn't suggest it in any way. This is what came out naturally from that process between the artists and the activists. I think having it in these stories... Again it signifies within the community that this is part of that community, that this comes from that community, and the people who are depicted in the stories, and the artists who are working in ally-ship with those activists, very much understand and respect and appreciate their community of rights defenders.

The larger issue in some of our other stories, which will come out and some of the other anthologies, there's other symbolism that that speaks to specific contexts. So, we have a few couple of stories about Palestine, for instance, where some of the symbology that's associated with the Palestinian movement does appear in those stories because it naturally comes out of those stories. With Hong

Kong—we have a story from Hong Kong about efforts there to stand up to increasing authoritarianism—some of the symbology that's used in the story speaks very powerfully to the community in Hong Kong, and the democracy movement in both Hong Kong and China, that may not be as familiar to people who aren't familiar with that context. But it still was important to the protagonist and to the artist to make sure that that symbology was there so that it did speak to that community itself, first and foremost.

With the pink and purple, I think it just so happens that, because we made this first collection of stories about women's rights defenders and sex worker rights defenders, that just happened to be the dominant color palette that was used by the artists. It wasn't necessarily intentional. These stories came out, again, over the period of a couple of years and with many different artists. So, I think it just ended up being that way. It wasn't something we noticed as we were doing the stories. In one of the editions of Cypher, from whatever month, there might be one story about a women's rights defender, one story about an indigenous community, and one story about the political struggle in Sudan or something like that. So, I think it's more accidental. But it worked out that way.

TFSR: It's very interesting how those things tend to sync up, though, I think. Can you talk a little bit about what you mean by the term "human rights defender?" Am I correct that the qualities of a human rights defender look different in every country and are shaped by the context of their surroundings? I would like to know what the universal qualities are, and I would like to know how that term would relate to the term of an organizer or an activist.

AS: I think you're right, it does look different in every country. Sometimes even within countries it can look quite different depending on circumstances and where you are. There is a United Nations resolution that was adopted by the General Assembly in 1998 for recognition and protection of human rights defenders. In that resolution, which has become kind of like the founding document and helps define who would be a human rights defender. Basically, the resolution allows for anybody at any time to be considered a human rights defender if they're undertaking an effort, work, or a stand of some kind to defend the rights of others or their communities, defending one of the rights that are covered under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It doesn't necessarily have to mean that it's a profession. It doesn't necessarily mean that it's something you're doing all the time.

So, in the sort of most liberal or open interpretation of that, if someone is writing an article in defense of one of the many human rights that people are meant to enjoy, the person writing that article—they could be, I don't know, a finance reporter, but let's say that person feels compelled to write about something that that is of interest to them. In that moment that they're writing that, publishing that, they could be a human rights defender. This identity often comes up when someone, though, is being persecuted for that activity. So being punished in some

way intimidated, harassed, and in the worst-case scenario, killed for their work or their efforts as a human rights defender.

Over time, that initial definition has come to also include defense of the environment. So even though defending the land... The community of activists who are working on climate change, for instance, most organizations, most folks in the UN system, etc, in these formal structures, do today count and consider those who are working in those sectors, in those spaces, as human rights defenders, even though they aren't defending an individual right or even a community right, although the community right to clean air, clean water, etc, is something that is increasingly become the norm.

For my work and of Front Line Defenders—the organization I used to work for and where this project started—we did try to apply a very, very wide interpretation of who would be a human rights defender, particularly if somebody was being attacked for doing that kind of activity. The interesting thing and why it was so important for us to include sex worker rights defenders in this book is because we do see, both Beldan and I and also our Front Line Defenders at the time, still consider those who are defending the rights of sex workers to do this work as a profession, or not even as a profession, or as an activity that they're doing for whatever purposes for however long they're doing it, that the people who are protecting those individuals rights are also human rights defenders. That, obviously, for lots of reasons—or at least lots of excuses—is considered to be somewhat controversial and in some cases taboo. There are some organizations out there in the ecosystem of human rights organizations that don't consider sex worker rights defenders as human rights defenders. But we, a least the Front Line Defenders, took an approach that looked at it from, "Are these people defending the rights related to labor rights, or health rights, or gender-based rights, or any other kind of identity rights?" We took that in the affirmative, and therefor included that. For this book, we felt it was really important to also include those stories.

In terms of, the attempts to use the term "human rights defender," as opposed to "activist" or as opposed to "organizer," essentially, basically, they're synonymous in almost every instance that I can think of. The term human rights defender has developed because of the UN resolution and because of other institutionalized spaces where things like the European Union has guidelines on the protection of human rights defenders. So, this term human rights defender has become sort of like the institutional term that's meant to both signal and to which states and other stakeholders make commitments, but in practical terms, I always thought of myself as an activist. I never actually used to think of myself with this term human rights defender, although I think it certainly applies. There's no denigration in that sense towards the word "activist" or "organizer." It's more just that this has become a kind of institutionalized terminology for the norm, which is meant for the protection of all these people who are doing this work.

TFSR: To tie it in with the wider project of Cypher, in the introduction of the book you talk about the different meanings of the word Cypher. You touched on Cypher as a secret code, and you also touch on the hip hop connotation of Cypher as a form of collaboration. I wonder if you could say a little bit about what you've observed in the collaboration between these human rights defenders and the folks who they are defending, the groups who they seek to defend and represent.

AS: I think what I've observed... this is beyond just the storytelling process that we have with Cypher, but having spent the better part of 10 years working for an organization that was working for the protection of human rights defenders, I obviously got to observe, I got to visit—I must have traveled to over 60 countries during the time—so I got to see a lot of people working on the front lines of struggle in a lot of different contexts, different places, different geographies, etc. One thing I think is pretty consistent across the board, no matter where you are, is that those who are putting themselves out there for the defense of another group of people, or of their community, or of their environment, or their land, or whatever, are often doing so understanding, first and foremost, that they're putting themselves at risk, and often also putting their families at risk of some kind. It could be physical risk, physical harm, it could be risk of reputational harm, it could be risk of just simply there being limitations to the kinds of opportunities that they or their family members might have later in other walks of life unrelated to their activism. In doing so, pretty much every case that I've observed and worked with people who are taking undertaking this work, they're often doing it out of a position of love. I know that sounds a little bit corny. I will be the last person that folks would expect to say it this way. But I do believe it's true.

I do believe that people are operating from a position of love for their community, for the people that they find community with. It doesn't have to be the people that are living in the same community, it could be based on identity issues, or out of respect or a sense of fairness, or a sense of empathy. That is something that is extraordinary. It's easy to be cynical about a lot of stuff that we see in our world. It's even to be cynical about human rights activists, also. None of these people who are undertaking this work are perfect human beings. We all make mistakes; we all interpret things in our own ways. Sometimes that isn't in sync with people around us all the time.

But I think nonetheless, in the work that I've seen human rights defenders undertake, and the way they undertake it, it always comes down to this sense of real love and solidarity. These two principles that guide the work of human rights defenders and how they engage with their communities.

From the community standpoint, it's sometimes a hard thing to see people who are putting themselves out there to defend your rights, if you're not necessarily comfortable with doing that yourself. It can be a tricky dynamic and a tricky kind of relationship. Especially, the dependency type of relationship that can develop between the community and the organizers in the community, or the activists in the community, that can develop too, and sometimes there can be unhealthy elements to that as well. But that said, I've always seen a tremendous amount of respect from

communities for those people who are undertaking to put themselves out there, especially where there is great personal risk for doing so.

When somebody from the community, who is a human rights defender, to whom harm is done, when that happens, it can be very devastating for the community itself. People often only began to start really appreciating those organizers amongst them once something bad, unfortunately, happens. There is that element of it. I'm just thinking about some of the indigenous communities that we met, for instance, in South America, or a trans community in Aceh, Indonesia, different types of places where I've been where we're talking about working with rural communities that are very much on the margins of society, and very much at risk because of their identity, or because of where they live, or because of the mineral resources that are under them that companies and governments want. They're high stakes for a lot of these groups. And yet, I think the principles of love and solidarity really do shine through.

TFSR: So, I guess, in that regard... I'm trying to think of the best way to ask this. So, these stories all place the activists in the foreground of the story. That has a narrative place because you have to start the story somewhere. I guess what I'm asking is, in what ways does this activist-led approach empower the people who they are ostensibly defending and educating? I want to know if you think something is lost by not placing the people struggling against the oppression in the foreground. You answered this previously, it's sort of a function of the environment that they're in, but I would like to know when advocacy is a better strategy than self-directed organizing.

AS: I'll preface this by saying that some of the stories, a fair number that we have in the collection—again, this is the first volume of an anthology, we have two others that will be coming out over the next couple of years—some of them do approach it more from a collective perspective, or the community and the struggle perspective. That said, this was a project started at an organization, as you pointed out, Front Line Defenders, which took an approach of... Its entire mission as an NGO was to protect human rights defenders. That's ultimately one of the reasons why I finally left after 10 years, because I actually wanted it to be working more on the struggle side, on the larger collective side of it, rather than the focus on the activists or the defenders and limited to that. I wanted to work more on causes and struggles more broadly.

So, with Cypher, up until we went independent, that was kind of like the mandate that we had with this project because it was under the auspices of this organization. Now that we're independent, we do plan on doing more a wider range of storytelling. I think we'll still have profiles of activists, stories that are driven more by the protagonist in the case, but I think we plan on having more stories that depict the broader struggle of a community and not a primary focus on the individuals because that fits more both with mine and Beldan's, both of us, our own approaches to how we see solidarity, how we see using this platform, and what

Cypher can be, and where we want to go with the project. So, I would just say, in a year and two years, I think you'll see a greater diversity of these kinds of stories, and I think we'll all be better for it.

I will say that, unfortunately, one of the unintended consequences, but nonetheless, somewhat of a reality of the UN resolution on human rights defenders, and the increased focus on safety and protection for human rights defenders, which over the last 20 years has become a real critical issue as the number of defenders killed each year increases, the number of defenders incarcerated each year because of the human rights work increases globally. The emphasis by funders, by governments, by international organizations, etc., on protection of the activists or the defenders has led to a decrease in attention, funding, space, opportunities to be engaged, for support for the struggles themselves, the bigger issues themselves to be addressed.

It doesn't have to be an either or, but unfortunately, in a lot of cases, you see the way resources are deployed, or you see the way spaces were offered, or what gets privileged in terms of how things are reported in the media or whatever, ends up tending to minimize the bigger collective struggle at the expense of giving higher profile or support to the individual activists, in part from a protection standpoint, and to some extent, from a storytelling standpoint. That's definitely something that we're intending to shift away from with Cypher as we go forward with it. I think you'll see a lot more of that coming out. I think it's in part because we recognize and understand that the bigger struggle, as the defenders themselves often articulate, is the important thing, and that's where the attention needs to be.

TFSR: This might then tie into what you've just explained. Do you think that the concept of human rights defense is separate from political action? I felt that the language of We Are Many, the way in which the stories were told, they sort of felt politically neutral, even though you could certainly feel the solidarity through them. I wonder if that is sort of a function of the Human Rights Defense Project and maybe also to make this kind of work more palatable to a wider audience.

AS: I do think that the global human rights movement, if we think of it from the international perspective, in terms of the big international organizations and the spaces that they create for activists around the world to participate in, does try to de-emphasize the politics of human rights and of the movements of the struggles. I think that that's been a growing trend over the last 20 years or so. I think at the local levels, though, activists very much understand what their struggles are and how they are political and politicized and how they are engaging in politics.

Now, there has definitely been those who, even at local levels, try to de-emphasize the political element of their struggles because they understand from the repression that they face that once they enter into a space that's considered political, it puts them and their movements and everything at much graver risk. If they try to keep it or try to express it in a way that tries to convey a political neutrality, that is

a strategic approach to try to believe that they can achieve something or move the center of gravity or move stakeholders, political elites, whatever, and shift them. In some countries, LGBT+ rights de-emphasizing the political element of it in order to try to achieve positive results has been a strategy that folks have tried.

Whether or not it's successful can be assessed on a case-by-case basis, but there has been this kind of idea that... and I'm not picking on this community at all, this is just the one that came to mind immediately, but there are others in the environmental spaces and labor rights spaces and other spaces where the effort to de-emphasize politics or as the movement as political in order to appeal to a more universal, an idea of a universal human rights perspective that is politically neutral, is sometimes a strategic choice by local activists and something that gets a lot of support from by the international community, by donors, by others who want to be contributing to something that they see as above politics. That probably is, I think, not a great way of approaching it.

I think that to understand human rights struggles as not political is a disservice and a complete misunderstanding. I don't think that those who are doing the repression ever stop thinking that human rights is political. So, you're sort of operating in a way that is not engaging the entity that you're up against on the same terms that they understand it, not that they can necessarily dictate the terms to you. I've spent a lot of time working on and being involved with nonviolent strategic resistance approaches and tactics and theories and strategies. One of the key things is to understand when you're trying to undo the pillars of support for that repression, you have to understand how those pillars of support operate in order to undo them. If you're ceding political ground to appeal to a more universal idea that your opponent or the person you're confronting or entity that you're confronting doesn't at all consider, it's very hard to see how you can remove that pillar of support without engaging more directly and probably more accurately.

TFSR: So, for my last question: None of these struggles occur in a vacuum. Can you talk about how emergent humanitarian crises can impact work that's already going on? Like how you have observed it superseding or shifting the center of gravity or anything along those lines. Does that question make sense?

AS: I think so. I think it depends a little bit on the kind of humanitarian crisis that we're talking about. If it's in the realm of natural disaster, then I think what happens is that human rights defenders, civil society, those who are connected to civil society, or just at grassroots levels with communities oftentimes can be the most effective risk first responders and really are at the forefront of bringing immediate humanitarian assistance, pointing out where humanitarian assistance needs to come get to, and also exposing in a lot of cases. I'm reminded here of like the disaster in Hawaii not that long ago, where you had activists on the ground who were not only directing where humanitarian support needed to go, but also exposing the politics in the disaster. I think the way they saw it was an inevitable disaster because

of the way that the land had been allocated and changed, the disrespect completely for indigenous rights and indigenous ways of living. I think that became part of the discussion in a way that was wholly due to the activism that was going on in Hawaii at the time.

I think if we're talking about something more overt in terms of being manmade, like what's happening in Gaza right now, activists are targeted as part of this process that Israel's undertaking in Gaza. Whether they're journalists, professional journalists or grassroots journalists, human rights organizations and activists have been targeted. Their offices have been destroyed, their homes have been destroyed, and others have been killed. This is part and parcel of the intentionality of what I would see as genocidal policy going on to end the Palestinian people in Gaza. I think it depends a little bit on the kind of humanitarian crisis that we're talking about.

But I've certainly seen across everywhere I've been, I've been places where there are these crises where human rights defenders, activists, organizers, are often the ones best equipped best placed to be the ones to direct emergency response, first response and then even thinking through the longer term implications and how to rebuild or overcome, and a lot of times getting those voices heard, especially when you have an international system of crisis and humanitarian response that comes in getting those voices heard and prioritized is itself a struggle also, in competing for oxygen in in those spaces where discussions are had, plans are made, strategies are set, and budgets are allocated. While I think there's been some change over the years to respect that, that's also a very fraught political space, and human rights activists trying to maintain their work and at the same time respond to crises face a double burden on top of the repression that they face.

TFSR: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. I think that that's probably a good place to put a pin in it.

AS: Thank you so much for the time.



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